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RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND THE POPULATION QUESTION

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In a previous article in this journal¹ I have spoken of the biological value of religious belief. Such considerations as were presented in that article ought to be supplemented by an account of one further situation, a very specific and concrete situation, in which religious belief manifests its biological value most strikingly. I refer to the correlation between religious belief and a relatively high birth-rate, especially in the case of belief of a somewhat legalistic sort such as is now best exemplified in Catholicism. This correlation is very significant. It shows that religious belief possesses survival-value of a high order.

The connection between religious belief and the birth-rate in ancient history is a well-known fact. Fustel de Coulanges² has pointed out how, in the patriarchal families of the ancient Greeks and Romans, religion required the continuity of the family. The fate of the ancestral spirits was believed to depend upon offerings made at their tombs by their descendants. Continuity of the family was required for the sake of the sustenance of the departed ancestors. Celibacy was an impiety, forbidden by religion and also by civil law when law arose out of religious requirements as something distinct from them. The ancient laws of Rome forbade celibacy.³ The ancient Hindus had similar laws. For the Hindus as for the Greeks and Romans the extinction of a family caused the ruin of the family religion, and this was to be avoided by all means.⁴ Among the ancient Hebrews also it was a fundamental religious duty to "be fruitful and multiply."

All this, however, is a matter of ancient history. It is more important to inquire about the relation between religious belief and increase of population in modern society.

¹ Vol. XXIX (1918), pp. 383-92.

² *The Ancient City*, (translation by Willard Small), Boston, 11th edition, 1901.

³ See Cicero, *De Legibus*, iii, 2.

⁴ See Fustel de Coulanges, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

In the first place, it seems a matter of common observation that, in general, the birth-rate is highest in families most influenced by religious belief. The reasons that might be assigned as the cause of this are various. In some cases the religiously inclined may feel a mystic obligation to rear a family. Fear of a concrete hell for those failing to fulfill their parental obligations may be the motivating power in other cases. Mr. Russell seems to incline to this explanation, and to think that the belief in hell-fire is thus biologically justified, when he says, "Men and women who can still believe the Catholic faith will have a biological advantage; gradually a race will grow up which will be impervious to all the assaults of reason, and will believe imperturbably that limitation of families leads to hell-fire"⁵ A third possible explanation of the connection between a high birth-rate and religious belief is the partial identity of the parental instinct and the religious sentiment. According to McDougall,⁶ the tender emotion, which is a correlate of the parental instinct, is a constituent also of the religious sentiment.

In the second place, statistical studies have supported the conclusions of casual observation by showing it to be a fact that, where religious belief thrives, there a relatively high birth-rate is generally to be found. The Italian premier Nitti⁷ has called attention to this fact. Leroy-Beaulieu has made a statistical study of the situation, not only in France, but in various other countries as well. He has found a high birth-rate among the Spanish and Italian Catholics, and in those sections of France where the Catholic church is strong.⁸ McDougall⁹ accepts the contention of Benjamin Kidd¹⁰ that one great influence of religious belief has been, and continues to be, its instrumentality as a support of the parental instinct against the tendency towards prudential limitation of the

⁵ Bertrand Russell, "Marriage and the Population Question," *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. XXVI (1915-16), p. 451.

⁶ See Wm. McDougall, *Social Psychology*, pp. 66ff and Ch. XIII.

⁷ Francesco S. Nitti, *Population and the Social Order* (translation), pp. 118-24.

⁸ Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, *La Question de la Population*. See especially pp. 395-402. Leroy-Beaulieu gives the following explanation of the influence of religion, especially Catholicism, on population: "*La religion catholique, plus encore que toutes les autres enseigne la résignation à son sort, condamne l'égoïsme et déconseille l'ambition; c'est-à-dire, qu'elle exalte le sentiment qui tend à rendre les familles nombreuses et qu'elle reprouve ceux qui tendent à diminuer le nombre des enfants.*" Pp. 397, 98).

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 272.

¹⁰ See Benjamin Kidd, *Social Evolution*, p. 295; also Ch. V.

birth-rate with developing intelligence. Sidney Webb¹¹ explains the high birth-rate among Catholics in England by reference to the fact that the Catholic church absolutely forbids any regulation of the marriage state. Of the distribution of this high birth-rate he says,¹² "It is significant that Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom in which the birth-rate has not declined; that in Ireland itself it has declined a little in semi-Protestant Belfast, and not at all in Roman Catholic Dublin; and that in the towns of Great Britain the decline is least in Liverpool, Salford, Manchester, and Glasgow—towns in which the proportion of Roman Catholics is considerable." Webb finds that among the metropolitan boroughs the highest birth-rate is "in those boroughs in which the Irish Roman Catholics (and the Jews who, in this respect, are in the same position) are most numerous."¹³ Many economists have tried to correlate high and low birth-rates with conditions of poverty and wealth, but Webb shows that there is a closer correlation with religious belief than with economic conditions. As a matter of fact, however, poverty and religious belief are frequently found together since many people find compensation in religion for the lack of the material satisfactions of life.

For a most complete and convincing array of statistics upon this subject, Mr. Meyrick Booth's article, "Religious Belief as Affecting the Growth of Population,"¹⁴ should be consulted. Booth shows, for example, that, according to the Catholic Year Book for 1914, the birth-rate per 1000 of Roman Catholics in Great Britain was 38.6, while the average rate for the whole population was but 24.0. In the United States, among those states which, according to the religious census of 1906, had a small population of Catholics, the birth-rate was low, averaging 15 or less per 1000. On the other hand, in five states with a large proportion of Catholics, the birth-rate averaged about 23 or 24 per 1000.¹⁵

There may be a temperamental basis for susceptibility to religious belief, and temperament is hereditary. As McDougall says,¹⁶ basing his conclusions on studies made by Karl

¹¹ *The Decline of the Birth-Rate*, Fabian Tract, No. 131, 1907.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ In the *Hibbert Journal*, Vol. XIII (1914-15) pp. 138-54.

¹⁵ Booth's article is a careful study of the situation, and gives many tables of statistics, which should be consulted by anyone who is not convinced of the importance of religious belief as influencing population increase.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 273.

Pearson,¹⁷ about one-half of each generation is recruited from one-quarter of the preceding generation. The quarter with highest birth-rate is, as I have shown, the most religious portion of society. So far, then, as there is a temperamental basis for religious belief, and so far as temperament is hereditary, the religious temperament, and consequently religious belief, can not die out while the birth-rate is highest among those possessing the requisite temperament.

The correlation between religious belief and a relatively high birth-rate is most conclusive evidence of the biological value of religious belief. If unbelievers are not so much interested as others in founding families, then their unbelief perishes with them; while religious belief springs up in each new generation from a perennial source of vital human need.

¹⁷ See Karl Pearson, *Chances of Death*.